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Rain fell so fast the other night in Mertzon, two lightning bugs were trapped in the gauge behind my house. Reflection off the glass tube, a distress signal, I suppose, was strong enough to be seen from the kitchen window some 30 feet away. I thought at first a kid playing with a flashlight had come through the back way.

As these luminous bugs decreased over the years, the wattage increased from their body lights. Lightning bugs nowadays are throwing off from 60 to 75 watts and reaching up to 220 degrees Fahrenheit of body temperature. Under the power of bifocals, I stopped sitting out in the yard at the ranch in the evening. The glare off my lenses from the lightning bugs flying around the yard resembled being by the side of a busy street at nightfall.

Lightning bugs live a lonely life. Black fever mosquitoes and fierce ear canal gnats like the still of darkness. Those deadly bloodsuckers and nerve wreckers don't want a bug flashing around alerting people any more than a burglar wants a pair of luminous bicycle britches to wear on an upstairs job.

Rain gauges should have been called insect traps in the first place. On a year's run in the shortgrass country, the gauges catch a lot more bugs than they do rain. In the spring, I run mine to check the hatch from the warm weather. Groundlings like beetles must go to a lot of trouble to

climb five feet up a fence post to topple over into a six-inch glass tube.

I used to wonder how crickets ended up trapped in the tubes. One day just by chance I rode up on a cricket admiring his reflection off the bottom of the glass. He became so mesmerized, he lost his balance and slid in head first. There wasn't any use rescuing him. I've seen enough humans stumble off the curb admiring themselves in store windows to know that saving a cricket from the same fate was foolish.

Summer storms caught a lot more things by surprise than lightning bugs. The San Angelo weather station does good to hit the changes in the seasons in the shortgrass country, much less issue a three-day forecast. Weather is so unpredictable in this part of Texas, veteran meteorologists give vague calls. "Partly cloudy" and "high winds on area lakes" are big favorites.

The herders out here study such oldtime signs as nocturnal animals wandering in the daylight hours and yellow-headed black birds perching on corral fences. Wispy clouds floating over in bright blue skies, called mare's tails, mean a change. But no one hits too high a score. After a front passes from the Panhandle to Abilene, the clouds may break up, or head east and skip our country. Many a shortgrasser has sat out a sad evening in the front yard watching a big purple bank of clouds sweep off to the northeast to flood Brownwood and Fort Worth, leaving us to

be tortured by the smell of moisture and the sight of dust kicking up from the side winds.

We lost count of the rainfall here at the ranch after the drouth started breaking last fall. I knew within two decimal places of how much moisture we received and the exact time and dates it fell in the six years of dry weather. When it took a 10 cc. syringe to suck the last drop from the gauges, I had a set of books on rainfall that would have made the Dean of the Business School at the University of Texas take notice. But once I began to have something to measure, I became so excited about the new growth, I forgot the reason for the greenery.

Besides being unable to stand prosperity, real or imagined, every time a drouth ends, the old brain cells are rattled a bit more. Last week in the midst of some of the heaviest rains and flooding of the season, a friend called from up north of San Angelo. He opened: “Monte, you ain’t going to believe this (true), but we had a dust storm this afternoon.”

Poor old fellow shook out so much cottonseed meal from paper sacks and broke so many bales of sudan grass for his cattle last year, he’s still seeing dust in the skies, prompted from that mysterious brain that caused him to be a rancher in the first place.